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## Review: Ark Encounter

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James S. Bielo. *Ark Encounter: The Making of a Creationist Theme Park*. New York: New York University Press, 2018. 240pp. 978-1-47984-279-7.

Publisher's Website (<https://nyupress.org/9781479842797/ark-encounter/>)

“Think Bigger.” These two words welcome visitors to the Ark Encounter’s website.[1] Founder Ken Ham and the fundamentalist organization Answers in Genesis promote the massive structure as an entertaining, immersive, and historically-authentic introduction to the flood described in the book of Genesis. James Bielo’s new book, *Ark Encounter: The Making of a Creationist Theme Park* focuses on the spaces, people, ideas, and activities weaving together this unique experience.

A prolific scholar of religious anthropology at Miami University, Bielo offers an ethnographic examination of the much-discussed northern Kentucky theme park. His study is particularly concerned with how the Ark-park acts as a “form of religious publicity [that] mobilizes the strategies and imperatives of modern entertainment to claim cultural legitimacy and authority.” The multi-million-dollar attraction—part biblical reenactment, part “wild adventure”—exemplifies fundamentalists “vying for cultural authority in American public life” (3). Put another way, the Ark’s life-like exhibits, family-friendly leisure, and sheer architectural magnitude constitute an evangelical endeavor to embolden creationists and challenge distrust of noncreationists (29). A strategic materialization of creationism, the Ark stands as the combination of specific biblical argument and family entertainment, palatably packaging scriptural literalism with zoos, ziplines, and buffet-style restaurants. Exploring the to-scale recreation of Noah’s ark, family, animals, and cargo, visitors can experience historical affirmation of creationist exegesis while having fun. With the park’s dual venture in mind, this monograph illustrates how Christian fundamentalism,

and specifically its version of biblical interpretation, is “re-created through material processes, such as the choreography of religious space and the testimony of the senses” (6).

*Ark Encounter* makes a stimulating and significant contribution. Not unlike historian John Wigger’s recent study of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker’s “evangelical empire,” Bielo engages readers with an expression of American fundamentalism at once staggeringly popular and often-lampooned.[2] And, importantly, he attends to fundamentalism’s theological distinctives through a creative analytical framework and fresh inquiries. *Ark Encounter*’s extended material inspection of this creationist theme park—through its strategic advertising, astonishing reproduction of Noah’s ark, conservative educational resources, and family-centric entertainment opportunities—demonstrates fundamentalism’s complicated engagement with contemporary culture. Through such an approach we gain crisp insight into fundamentalism’s theological tactility and how the Ark’s “physical, experiential, and choreographed” productions offer visitors “affective access to the biblical past and reproduces commitments to biblical authority through aesthetic strategies” (38-9).

Alongside its efforts to explain the park’s spatialization of fundamentalism, one of *Ark Encounter*’s principal attractions (if I may) is its ethnographic framework. Drawing on five years of “backstage access,” Bielo’s interviews, photographs, and field notes provide unique insight into the theme park’s innerworkings. Though in the book’s informative appendix he admits that some restrictions impacted his research, he gifts readers with wonderful descriptions of staff meetings integral to the construction of the Ark’s public image and reinforcement of its theological underpinnings (13-4).

Readers may wonder if more historiographical engagement could have benefited *Ark Encounter*. Given the monograph’s inquiries into American fundamentalism, evangelicalism, and Christianity and business, it is odd that Kate Bowler, George Marsden, and Matthew Sutton go unmentioned.[3] This book’s story about contemporary fundamentalism’s public materialization and commercialization, about the movement’s innovative techniques for claiming and marking its victory (or expectations thereof), appears deeply relevant to these scholars (3, 138). For example, in 1986 Marsden’s path-breaking *Fundamentalism and American Culture* argued famously that fundamentalists are evangelicals marked by their strident anti-liberalism and biblical literalism.[4] Over thirty years later, *Ark Encounter* clearly shows how today’s most recognizable fundamentalists have, in striking fashion, doubled down in

their critique of modern American life and re-emphasized conservative theological principals. Most impressive, Bielo demonstrates his case through an analysis of space instead of politics—an important achievement.

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[1] See arkencounter.com (<http://arkencounter.com>).

[2] See John Wigger, *PTL: The Rise and Fall of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker's Evangelical Empire* (Oxford, 2017).

[3] See specifically, Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (Oxford, 2013), George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, Second Edition (Oxford, 2006 [1986]), and Matthew Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* (Harvard, 2014).

[4] Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 3-4.

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